

PROTECTION PRIORITIES

Site Specific Priorities

Although site significance rankings indicate the biological significance of sites, they do not reveal protection needs. In general, conservation efforts should be concentrated on the most significant sites in the county. Development and fragmentation are probably the greatest threats to significant sites in Watauga County. Protection priorities for particular sites are summarized below.

The least protected, most significant sites in the county are contained within the Amphibolite Mountains Macrosite. Permanent protection of the ecological communities and processes in the wetland parts of Long Hope Valley is the most critical conservation need in Watauga County. Forested, non-wetland areas in the Long Hope Valley site are a high priority for protection, for the biodiversity they support, for their role in buffering the valley wetlands, and for their function in maintaining landscape connections to other sites. Elk Knob, a part of the Long Hope Valley site, appears to be especially at risk of development. The high elevation forests, high summit outcrops, and Grassy Bald community in the Potato Hill/Rich Mountain Bald site have no formal protection, but should be a high priority. Although part of Potato Hill Bogs and Seeps is now protected by the State, high quality Southern Appalachian Bogs further west remain without protection. Protection of the state's largest population of fringed gentian (*Gentianopsis crinita*) at Howards Creek Floodplain should be considered as a Department of Transportation mitigation site, since part of the population grows along a state-maintained road. Opportunities to preserve landscape connections between sites in the Amphibolite Mountains Macrosite should not be overlooked. Excellent landscape connections currently exist between Long Hope Valley, Snake Mountain, and Potato Hill/Rich Mountain Bald, but these high elevation, unfragmented grassland areas could soon be at risk of development.

Areas in the south end of the county are also of high priority. Substantial areas on Grandfather Mountain, especially high elevation areas northeast of the summit of Calloway Peak, are critical to maintaining the ecological integrity of the core site. Though these areas are informally protected, they would benefit from permanent, lasting protection. Dun Vegan Mountain should be a priority for protection for its high quality High Elevation Rocky Summit community and the presence of the very rare Roan Mountain bluet (*Houstonia montana*) and Heller's blazing star (*Liatris helleri*). The primary need at Hanging Rock Mountain is protection of the High Elevation Rocky Summit community on the summit peak, with adequate buffering land to limit access by unauthorized visitors. However, control of access will continue to be limited by the proximity of developed areas on the south side of the summit (i.e., in Seven Devils).

The old-growth Canada Hemlock Forest at Sims Creek Old Growth Forest and mature forested areas in the Moses Cone Park -- Flat Top Mountain site should be formally protected by the National Park Service.